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A LIFE OF LEARNING

Helen Vendler

Charles Homer Haskins
Lecture for 2001

American Council of Learned Societies

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The Charles Homer Haskins Lecture

Charles Homer Haskins (1870-1937), for whom the ACLS lecture series is named, was the first Chairman of the American Council of Learned Societies, from 1920 to 1926. He began his teaching career at the Johns Hopkins University, where he received the B.A. degree in 1887, and the Ph.D. in 1890. He later taught at the University of Wisconsin and at Harvard, where he was Henry Charles Lea Professor of Medieval History at the time of his retirement in 1931, and Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences from 1908 to 1924. He served as president of the American Historical Association in 1922, and was a founder and the second president of the Medieval Academy of America in 1926.

A great American teacher, Charles Homer Haskins also did much to establish the reputation of American scholarship abroad. His distinction was recognized in honorary degrees from Strasbourg, Padua, Manchester, Paris, Louvain, Caen, Harvard, Wisconsin, and Allegheny College, where in 1883 he had begun his higher education at the age of thirteen.

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Brief Biography

Helen Vendler was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1933, the middle child of three siblings. Her parents were both schoolteachers, and her father taught her and her sister Spanish, French, and Italian in their childhood; her mother knew countless poems by heart. Vendler received her B.A. in Chemistry in 1950 at Emmanuel College, Boston, and was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship in mathematics at the University of Louvain, Belgium, during 1954-55. After a year studying literature as a special student at Boston University, she was admitted to the Radcliffe Graduate School, receiving her Ph.D. in English and American Literature in 1960. She married Zeno Vendler, a philosopher, and went with him to Cornell, where she taught for three years; the marriage produced a son, David (who is now married to Xianchung Jiang; they have two children). After Cornell, Vendler, now divorced, taught at Haverford, Swarthmore, Smith, and for nineteen years, at Boston University (with a year as a Fulbright Professor at the University of Bordeaux in 1968-69). In 1980 she was appointed to a Professorship at Harvard, where she is now a University Professor (the first woman elevated to that rank). At Harvard, she was for thirteen years a Senior Fellow in the Society of Fellows, and for five years an Associate Dean.

Vendler's work as a critic has always been directed towards lyric poetry. Even though her dissertation (published as *Yeats's* Vision *and the Later Plays)* was on another genre, she considered it preparatory work for a book on Yeats's poetry (which she is now in the process of writing). Subsequent books were on Wallace Stevens, George Herbert, John Keats, William Shakespeare, and Seamus Heaney. From 1968 to the present, Vendler has frequently written on contemporary poetry for such journals as *The New York Times Book Review, The New Yorker, The New York Review of Books, The London Review of Books,* and *The New Republic.* Her reviews and essays have been collected in three volumes: *Part of Nature, Part of Us; The Music of What Happens;* and *Soul Says.* Vendler's T.S. Eliot Lectures —*The Given and the Made*—and her Richard Ellmann

A Life of Learning

by

Helen Vendler

Intensities

It's an honor to give the Haskins Lecture, to be part of a ritual that has already produced many absorbing accounts of what a life of learning might be. Rather than give a chronological account alone, I want to begin with the three most intense episodes of my own learning: the most decisive one, the eeriest one, and the most anguishing one.

The most decisive intensity accompanied my instinctive conviction that I should write solely on poetry. When I was in graduate school, you had to classify yourself as a scholar of a certain historical period in England or America. I called myself, when forced to do so, "a Victorian." Yet I'd seen that many of my teachers, though officially scholars of a given period, were internally something else. These were the poetry people—Rosemond Tuve, Douglas Bush—who, no matter what their period, taught chiefly poetry rather than plays or novels. I sensed that I too belonged to that crypto-group of poetry people, and it gave me a ratifying satisfaction to vow that whatever "the profession" might think of me, I would always write only about poetry, without confining myself to a single century or

a single country. (Ten years ago, in the papers of a close friend, I came across a letter written to her when I was in my early twenties, describing the authors I wanted to write about: they came from several different periods and from both England and America, so my resolve was firm even then.)

The eeriest intensity of my history of learning was aroused by my discovery, at twenty-three, of the poetry of Wallace Stevens. It was as if my own naked spirit spoke to me from the page. I'd read dozens of poets by the time I came across Stevens, and I'd memorized scores of poems, but it was through him that I understood style as personality, style as the actual material body of inner being. Before I could make out, in any paraphrasable way, Stevens' poems, I knew, as by telepathy, what they meant emotionally: and this experience was so peculiar that I was overcome by a desire to know how that perfusion, which somehow bypassed intellectual translation, was accomplished. All my later work has stemmed from the compulsion to explain the direct power of idiosyncratic style in conveying the import of poetry.

If the discovery of lyric as a field was the most decisive episode of my life of learning, and the impact of Stevens, revealing to me my consuming interest in linguistic and structural idiosyncrasy, the eeriest one, the most anguishing episode came when I was thirty-four, in 1967. I was divorced, raising my son David, receiving minimal child-support ($90 per month), and working very hard teaching ten courses a year—four each term (of which one was night-school overload), and two each summer. I'd published my dissertation on Yeats in 1963, but I hadn't been able to write in a continuous fashion since then. I'd failed to make progress with a book on George Herbert, realizing that I'd have to train myself further in Renaissance poetry, a task I didn't then have time for. Instead, I'd begun a book on Stevens, but my energy was flagging, and I had no money for child care or household help. One night, exhausted, I tried to think how to make my life easier. I obviously had to continue teaching and keeping house and taking care of my young son. The only way I could make my life easier was to give up

writing. "They can't make me," I said to myself in panic and fear and rage, "They can't make me do that." I suppose "They" were the Fates, or the Stars; but I knew that to stop writing would be a form of self-murder. After taking thought, I applied for a Fulbright Professorship to get a respite. After a year of mandarin leisure in Bordeaux in 1968-69, teaching three hours a week, everything improved; I was tenured and had a lighter teaching load; David was a little older.

Because my son was an only child, and I thought he needed an available companion in the house, I had resolved never to work when he was home and awake. Such as it was, my life of learning —indistinguishable to me from my life of writing—was a patchy, often fatigued, and always anxious, one. As my son got older, the precious nighttime hours after he went to sleep shrank in extent; and soon, like any adolescent, he was staying up later than I was. My life of studying and writing then began to take place, contrary to my circadian rhythm, in the early hours of the morning. I envied my male colleagues who, in those days, seemed to have everything done for them by their spouses. Marjorie Nicholson's essay saying that what women scholars needed was wives never seemed truer.

Being a Critic

Over time, I've written books on poets from Shakespeare to Seamus Heaney, with Herbert and Keats and Yeats and Stevens in between. The choice of a single genre as a field of expertise is still hardly acknowledged in job advertisements, yet how many scholars or critics can teach all the genres equally well? The fundamentally different structures of literature—linear in narrative, dialectic in drama, and concentric in lyric—and the historical failures (except in unusual cases) of great poets to write workable plays or novels (or great novelists to write memorable lyrics) suggest basic incompat-

ibilities among the genres. I only once, in want of money, agreed to review a novel (Mary McCarthy's *Birds of America* for *The New York Times Book Review*); and although I don't think the review was mistaken, I felt such guilt at falsifying my competence that I never again consented to write on fiction. I must say something about the vocation that separates me from the "scholar"—at least from what the typical scholar leading a life of learning is thought to be. I'm a critic rather than a scholar, a reader and writer more taken by texts than by contexts. From the time I was very young I continually asked myself, as I read through the works of poets, why some texts seemed so much more accomplished and moving than others. Why was Milton's "L'Allegro" more satisfactory than his "On the Death of a fair Infant dying of a Cough?" I believed, and still do, that anyone literate in poetry could see that the one was superior to the other. (Those who suppose there are no criteria for such judgments merely expose their own incapacity.) Still, to clarify to oneself and then to others, in a reasonable and explicit way, the imaginative novelty of a poem and to give evidence of its technical skill isn't an easy task. I've been brought to mute frustration by it when I know intuitively that something is present in the poem that I haven't yet been able to isolate or name or describe or solve. In chapter 12 of *Lord Jim*, Joseph Conrad remarks on "that mysterious, almost miraculous, power of producing striking effects by means impossible of detection which is the last word of the highest art." I wanted, hardly knowing how, to detect the means of that power.

A critic of my sort is, I suppose, "learnèd" in a way—that is, she has a memory for stories, styles, and structures she has seen before, and she understands the expressive possibilities latent in writing (from the larger forms of myth and narrative to the almost invisible arrangements of prepositions and articles). She remembers the combinations and permutations of words and syntax that she has come across, and is curious about the power of new assemblages. Against the background of known structures, she recognizes and defines original ones, finding names for them and inventing taxonomies in which they might be arranged. Her "learning"

resembles the "learning" of poets, which, though deeply etymological and architectonic, is often unsystematic and idiosyncratic. She often fails at the most elementary undertakings of "scholarly" life, such as remembering facts, entering polemical debates, and relating works to the political or philosophical history of their era. She has— at least I have—no capacity for broad synthetic statements.

Since every generalization needs an anecdote, I recall here the time I was hastily asked to substitute for a colleague in a term course in Romantic Poetry. I knew and loved the work of the six poets that I was to teach, but I felt some obligation, since I was preparing a "period course," to make some general remarks, to evoke some synthetic connections among the poets. I mentally tried out every sentence I could think of beginning "The Romantic poets are" or "The Romantic poets do," and, finding none of them true, descended to looking for smaller sentences that began, "Wordsworth and Coleridge both" or "Byron and Keats equally," and so on. Any completion I could think of was either otiose ("wrote blank verse") or thematic ("responded to the French Revolution"). Looking into scholarly books didn't help me. I told the students I would teach them about the poetry of each poet, but that poets are entirely too idiosyncratic to be compared with each other, and when poems are considered under gross thematic rubrics, all generic and linguistic originality vanishes from sight. My end-of-term evaluations came back saying "She was fine on individual poets, but she didn't tell us anything about Romanticism." (I learned not to apologize to students beforehand.)

Like all writers, I've had to accept the limits of my own capacities: the intricacies of style are to me as compelling as the labyrinths of ideology or history to others. And just as I would be incompetent as a theorist or a new historicist, I've seen that many scholars are incompetent as interpreters of poetry. To understand a poem it's necessary above all to understand its functional stylistic elements; and when a scholar—without a profound knowledge of the poet's work— swoops in on a single poem to illustrate an ideological point, he or she tends to falsify both the poem and the poet in

question. There is no ready and easy way to take the measure of a lyric: it must be seen in itself and as part of an individual oeuvre and as part of a literary tradition before it can be used to support any scholarly point at all.

Beginnings

What makes a critic? Parental legends of my childhood all had to do with words: that I began to talk at nine months; that by the time I was one, I knew a hundred words (that story is true; we found, on my parents' death, a list in the desk headed "Words Sister knew at one"); that at two, hearing my four-year-old sister say the "Our Father" in Latin, I asked from my crib, "Daddy, can I say it too?" and did. (Why any father would *want* to teach his four-year-old to recite the *Pater Noster* is another question.) My mother (who by the rules of the Boston school system had to relinquish at marriage her work as a primary schoolteacher) was the fount of poetry in the house, quoting it frequently in conversation; my father was the (often unreasonable) pedagogical experimenter, seeing how far he could press us to learn new languages. From working in Cuba (as a paymaster for the United Fruit company) and later teaching English in Puerto Rico, my father was fluent in Spanish; and he added French and Italian during postgraduate study to qualify as a high-school teacher of Romance languages. So we children too (my sister and I, that is; my brother, refusing, simply fled the house after school) were to learn first Spanish, and then French, and then Italian at home. At the same time, Latin was being purveyed to us at church and at my Catholic elementary school (we sang high and low Mass, the standard Latin hymns, and such "extras" as the Holy Week *Tenebrae,* as well as the Psalms in antiphonal chorus). Classical Latin—Caesar and Virgil—was added in high school. Language took on, under these many forms, a strange inexplicable shimmer; and I soon saw the disparate poetic effects possible in

different linguistic and prosodic systems. My father gave us simple poems in Spanish—Becquer, Dario—and I added them to the store of English poems I was finding in the anthologies in the house. In high school it was French poets that drew me, especially Ronsard (because I had discovered Shakespeare's sonnets) and Baudelaire (because I had discovered T.S. Eliot). The natural act of a critic is to compare; and I was always comparing.

I was always writing, too. When I wrote my first "poem" at six, I thought that a poem was something that scanned and rhymed. It wasn't until I was fifteen, when I read and memorized a whole batch of Shakespeare's sonnets, that I saw that a poem could tell the truth about one's inner being. In a night of what then seemed visionary insight, I wrote, at one sitting, five Shakespearean sonnets, and launched myself into a steady and secret writing of verse. It was for the following ten years the only honest part of my life.

Impediments

Most of my life was not honest. I was raised in an exaggeratedly observant Catholic household; my mother took us with her to daily Mass. From the time I went to school at four, my every day except Sunday began with a sung Requiem Mass, since in a large parish every day was necessarily the monthly or yearly anniversary of someone's death. With the Mass and the *Dies Irae* as daily bread, my imagination was never deprived. Against the disappointments and losses of her life, my mother shored the comforts of religion, which included writing conventional devotional verse—faultless in prosody if in nothing else; it was occasionally published in Catholic journals. (My mother's mother, whose North Carolinian father had been a public scribe in Boston, had written verse, too, my mother told me.) As soon as I began, at eleven, to ask questions of my mother about matters of doctrine that I found incredible—

from the Virgin Birth to the Resurrection—or matters of practice that I found intolerable—such as the prohibitions on birth control and divorce— she simply reiterated her belief in the Church as guide in matters of faith and morals, and closed off discussion. I began to feel both heretical and isolated.

I pleaded to be allowed to go to the Boston Girls' Latin School, as I was later to plead to be allowed to go to Radcliffe, but in both cases my parents denied me my wish. (In the second case, they were obeying Cardinal Cushing's forbidding from the pulpit, under pain of mortal sin, education at godless, atheistic, secular universities—it was the era of McCarthy.) In Roman Catholic elementary school, high school, and college, I couldn't ever publicly reveal what I was thinking. In college, two friends and I heard that certain nuns had warned other girls against us as a "bad element." We were innocent virgins, living soberly at home with our parents and getting A's; and we didn't understand. Much later, when I told this story to Czeslaw Milosz, he laughed and said that one of the Jesuits in his high school had said to him at fifteen, "Milosz, you have a criminal face." They knew us before we knew ourselves.

I'd expected to concentrate in English literature in college, but literature, I discovered with disgust, was taught as a branch of faith and morals. (This experience inoculated me forever against adopting any "ism" as a single lens through which to interpret literature.) I thought perhaps the French Department would be different: but there the study of French literature jumped more or less from Molière to Péguy, because Diderot, Pascal, Voltaire, Flaubert, Zola, Proust, and so on were all on the Index of Forbidden Books, and could not be read. In desperation, I turned to the sciences, where faith and morals could not corrupt intellectual life. In my classes in chemistry, biology, physics, and mathematics, not only did I come upon a new way of looking at the world but I also learned the useful logic of sequential and evidential exposition, which helped to form the way I write. Unsure of what I should do with my major in chemistry, I took the Medical College Admission Test and applied for a Fulbright in mathematics. I was awarded the Fulbright,

shelved the idea of applying to medical school, went to Belgium, changed from mathematics back to literature (with the permission of the Fulbright authorities) on realizing that I was for the first time in my life out of my parents' power, and wrote to Harvard requesting admission to the Ph.D. program in English.

During all this time of unwilling incarceration in religious environments, my poems were the only place I met myself. I submitted one to the college poetry contest; it won, but wasn't allowed to be printed in the college magazine, because it was thought by the nun-advisor to be indecent. It began:

> The mind's a prostitute at heart,
> Knows no joy until the hour
> The innocent curtains are blown apart,
> Olympus presses a golden shower.
>
> Nor fastidious, either—as welcome is
> A bull as swan, if Jove's beneath.
> The willing girl is first to kiss
> The milky horn, the orange beak.

I meant every word of it; the only simile I could find for the appetitiveness and promiscuity of the mind in the presence of whatever would carry it off to a new place was a sexual one. It was longing and then elation that I felt when hunting down truth and having it burst upon me: but I was too ignorant at that time to know that prostitution had no longing or elation in it.

My verse-writing continued sporadically in graduate school. I felt, though, that there was something my poems didn't have, though I tried to make them both emotionally accurate and formally competent. At last, as I happily wrote my dissertation, I found my true genre, the more prosaic one of criticism, and my desire to write poetry slipped away. (I much later realized that I don't possess the Coleridgean "continual reverie" of imagination; I don't live life on two planes at once as imaginative people do.)

I felt some guilt about ceasing to write poetry, and wondered whether I had betrayed a vocation. In my thirties, I was at a party where Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Elizabeth Bishop were present, and one of them asked me if I wrote poetry. I confessed to my lingering guilt and self-questioning about stopping. They laughed me to scorn, telling me that if I'd been meant to be a poet, and had tried to stop, I'd immediately have found myself prey to migraines, indigestion, insomnia, or something worse, that the Muse will not be balked of her own. I felt much better.

The familial and educational impediments I've described helped, I suppose, to make me a critic. I was always having, as an adolescent, to inquire into what I *did* think if I didn't think what everyone without exception around me did; and then I had to ask *why* I thought such things; and then I had to look for verification in other sources (operas, poems, autobiographies, never novels) of the attitudes I'd adopted. My first external action stemming from independence of thinking came when I was fifteen. It was customary, once a year at Sunday Mass, for the congregation to stand en masse and "take the pledge of the Legion of Decency," promising publicly not to attend any movies rated C ("objectionable") or D ("condemned"). My family—along with everyone else in the parish church —stood up to take the pledge. I remained grimly, obstinately, and conspicuously seated. Of course nobody said a word to me about it: the practice of the house was never to air anything. But from then on my parents knew that I had set my will against theirs, powerless though I was in every practical way. After I left my parents' house, I never again went to church. In spite of the grandeur and pathos of the Christian myths, I couldn't square them with my young and fierce worship of truth. Writing, I think, became in my adult life a compensation for all the years of mutinous silence at home and at school.

Furtherings

The first sustained and positive experience that helped make me a critic was a year spent at Boston University as a special student when I was twenty-two. Harvard, in the person of the chairman of the English Department, had replied, when I wrote from Belgium wanting to apply to the Ph.D. program, that I had no qualifications. I wrote back, asking what I would have to do to be qualified. An equally dismissive letter said, "Well, you could take English courses, and then apply." I came back from my Fulbright, lived uneasily at home, went to B.U., enrolled in six English courses each semester, took the Graduate Record Examination, and applied to Harvard, which admitted me. At B.U., my teachers led me from my literally medieval upbringing into the expansive precincts of secular thought. (I recall a teacher in a Renaissance course beginning his opening lecture by explaining that once upon a time people actually believed in such things as Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell; I felt like gesturing in the general direction of my parents' house.) One of my teachers at B.U., Morton Berman, gave me my first permanent model of delightful and thought-provoking teaching. In his quick-witted, vivid, and penetrating lectures, he entered with entire sympathy into the minds of the writers he taught, from Carlyle to Hopkins, from Newman to Tennyson. And he took his students seriously. To write about literature for such a teacher was to feel all the old constricting bonds unloosed, to see vistas of possible Elysian fields of the mind. (I dedicated my third book to him.) And Boston University—after my sequestration and confinement in all-female religious schools—seemed an intellectual Utopia proving that students of all ages, races, sexes, classes, and religions could learn together. I had at last found a world I could live in; and I've never regretted the world I left.

The hatred, frustration, and fear that had dominated my emotions in adolescence gradually drained away as I experienced two of the great blessings of adult life, friendship and motherhood. These

new dimensions made me conscious of what I'd found lacking in most of the scholarly and critical prose to which I'd been exposed: that is, a rich sense of the passions underlying and motivating literary expression. The base of poetry in the emotions was tacitly ignored in scholarship and criticism: and yet I felt one couldn't understand the way a poem evolves without acknowledging that base. If there was any conscious drive in me to alter the field of criticism as I encountered it, it was to insert into the analysis of lyric an analysis of its motivating emotions and convictions, and to demonstrate their stylistic results.

By thirty I had found, finally, freedom and affection, and had left what I saw as falsehood and repression in a search for truth and expressiveness. When I dedicated my first book of essays to my son, I did it with a quotation from Ben Jonson which expressed at its close the qualities I wanted both for us as a family and for my work: "Freedom and truth; with love from those begot."

The Profession

My first professional experience as a graduate student was to hear the chairman of the English Department of Harvard say to me warningly, as he signed my program-card during the opening week of classes, "You know we don't want you here, Miss Hennessy: we don't want any women here." I left his office trembling. (Thirteen years later, he apologized.) There were still professors in 1956 who would not admit women to their seminars. Almost all of the women admitted to graduate school at Harvard left. In those days, the structural difficulties in the way of women's success were hardly understood: women Ph.D.'s followed their non-academic husbands to towns where there was no university or college; or to colleges where rules concerning nepotism prohibited their working where their husband worked; or to colleges restricted to male

teachers and students; or to universities unwilling to hire a woman who was a wife and mother. The social pressure to have the "normal" number of children, and to stop working after children were born, was strongly felt. Doubts about women's intellectual powers were still widespread. And as women Ph.D.'s, defeated by these factors, fell by the wayside, the professors who had trained them became increasingly skeptical of the worth of investing in students who would probably never practice their profession. Women entering the Graduate School at Harvard felt their secondary status.

On the other hand, there were several professors in the department of English who were as eager to support women as men, and I had the luck to be taught by some of these. One (John Kelleher, who, as a literary historian and poet, never forgot the link of literature to life) recommended my thesis on Yeats to the Harvard Press; another (Douglas Bush, who, like John Kelleher, knew the poems he taught by heart) sent my name the year after my Ph.D. to the Guggenheim Foundation; and a third (Reuben Brower) later invited me to co-publish with him. Perhaps the most important influence on me at Harvard was I. A. Richards. I had wanted to take his course (I already knew his work), but the chairman, with a dismissive remark in that first interview ("He's not even a member of the Department!") forbade it, scratching out the course number himself on my program-card and writing in a course in Chaucer. But he couldn't prevent me from auditing Richards' course, and I found in his lectures how meditation on a poem could open into further and further depths of feeling. Rosemond Tuve came to Harvard for a year as a sabbatical replacement for Harry Levin; her seminar on Spenser taught me to think of poems in terms of genre, and we became lifelong friends. Northrop Frye visited, too; I was one of the crowd that had the thrilling experience of hearing *The Anatomy of Criticism* delivered orally before it saw publication. When I came to write my dissertation, I asked myself whose prose style I admired, and (knowing myself incapable of Douglas Bush's wit) turned to Frye as a model. Because I admired clarity, and Frye

was always clear, I studied his sentences and his paragraphs, and learned from his example how to write a chapter. (I learned, later, much more about writing a book from my brilliant editor at the Harvard Press, Margaretta Fulton.)

Though the profession as a whole was not friendly to women, stubborn persistence, at least in some cases, could carry the day. My first job was at Cornell, and when, at midyear, I had a baby, the chairman deprived me of teaching, declaring that those who had had babies knew that people with babies couldn't teach. At last, through the kind intervention of my colleague Stephen Parrish, the chairman relented and gave me a single spring-term 8 a.m. section of Freshman English. (Nobody but graduate students taught at 8 a.m.; I got up at six, readied myself and the baby, drove the baby three houses down the street to the babysitter, drove around the lake to class from 8 to 9, drove back and picked up the baby at 9:30, and felt I didn't have a job at all except when I was grading papers at night.) The following year the chairman gave me my job back full time, and, deciding I was serious, began to ask me to substitute in courses above the Freshman level as colleagues went on leave; in my third year he asked me to give a course of my own. A striking advance in my literary learning came at Cornell when I audited Paul De Man's course in Valery, Rilke, and Stevens; I encountered deconstruction (in which I had already been implicitly tutored by Stevens' poetry) and found it useful in its salutary countering of unity, coherence, and emphasis with dispersal, contradiction, and disjunction.

The profession, when I entered it, was not unfriendly to literary criticism, though many colleagues considered criticism lightweight by comparison to "real" scholarship. What the field was unfriendly to was reviewing, which was referred to as "mere journalism." I, on the other hand, took reviewing as the occasion for serious thought, and didn't see why it should be looked down on. Because of my slender means, I took every reviewing job I could get; reviewing was an agreeable and intellectual way to earn money; and it became for me a self-seminar in the new. To be asked to write on a new book

by John Berryman or James Merrill or Elizabeth Bishop was a heady joy; and reviewing to a word-limit for the general public taught me to aim in my prose for concision and a personal voice. After I had been writing for some years for *The New York Times Book Review* and *The New York Review of Books*, I had a call from William Shawn of *The New Yorker*, asking me to be their poetry critic. To me as to everyone writing for him, Mr. Shawn gave free rein, unlimited space, and genial encouragement.

I should tell the tale of my very first *New Yorker* review, because it sheds light on Mr. Shawn's character. I was asked to review the collected poems of an author who had recently died. I wrote truthfully on the scope and limits of the author's work, and sent off the review. Then came a phone call from Mr. Shawn: "Mrs. Vendler, I very much liked your review; it was interesting and well done. But I wanted to explain that I don't feel I can print it." (My heart sank.) "You see, there are things in it that I believe might hurt the feelings of the poet's widow, and I wouldn't want to be responsible for that." (I hadn't reckoned on live people being connected with a dead poet.) But Mr. Shawn kindly went on to add, "I'm sure there will be something else very soon that we'll want you to do for us"—and he kept his word. I wrote for the magazine for many years, until a new editor changed its character. Luckily, other editors continued to give me space, especially Robert Silvers of *The New York Review of Books;* and some new editors (among them Leon Wieseltier of *The New Republic* and Mary-Kay Wilmers of *The London Review of Books*) took me on.

Along with reviewing, I continued to write books on individual poets. To me the most extraordinary drama in literature—and the best current in which to investigate stylistics—is the development of a poet from callow imitation into full lyric mastery. I was helped in thinking about that process of development by two resources. In reflecting on its emotional and intellectual factors, I was influenced by Freud, as was natural to a member of my generation, and especially to one reading poets who had undergone psychotherapy: Lowell, Bishop, Berryman, Plath, Sexton. The husband of my close

friend Marguerite Stewart owned the complete Freud, and I often browsed in those volumes when I was in their house. I learned from Freud's seductive expository style as well as his revealing content. The second resource that influenced me in studying the poets' development and the consequent changes in their style was the discipline of linguistics. My former husband, Zeno Vendler, is a linguist as well as a philosopher, and his library of books on linguistics gave me, when we were first married, a new way into the minutiae of style. Stylistics is a relatively undefined field, sometimes practiced by linguists, sometimes by critics; it has had a more continuous tradition in European than in Anglo-American criticism. However, linguists and stylisticians too often separate the elements of style from the total imaginative practice of a poet and from the psychological and intellectual motivations of verse. In writing on poets, I have wanted to connect inseparably—as they are connected in the fluent unity of a poem—imagination, feeling, and stylistic originality. Each poet presents a new stylistic field; and one must perceive, in each case, a map by which one can draw a path from stylistic result back to imaginative and emotional cause. My "life of learning" has really been a life of coming to understand the expressive powers of the English language over several centuries as they are idiosyncratically invented by lyric poets.

Each of my books on a single author has had a polemical purpose as well as a descriptive one. These were, in sequence: to interpret Yeats's *Vision* as less a book of occult doctrine than as a thesis on poetics; to rehabilitate Stevens' longer poems from the view (most vividly expressed by Randall Jarrell) that they were elephantine and ponderous; to show (*contra* Coleridge and others) that an atheist's reading of Herbert could reveal the power and fineness of his poetry to those who didn't share his religious beliefs; to argue that Keats's odes exist not only as detached poems but also as a purposive sequence working out reflections on poetics that rebut associationist and sensationalist theories of the arts; to insist, in my second book on Stevens, that he was far from being the cold and solely intellectual writer of his conventional reputation; to consider Shakespeare's

sonnets as individual experiments in lyric language and structure rather than as narrative sites of thematic expression; and finally, to represent Seamus Heaney, whose poetry had so often been treated exclusively within political or national frameworks, as a writer who has made original interventions in almost all the lyric genres.

I've sometimes been characterized as a "formalist" critic: indeed, Frank Lentricchia (before his recent apostasy from his former positions) once called me "the Queen of Formalism"—two neo-Marxist denunciations in one. The label "formalist," it should be recalled, was in the earlier part of this century a term of abuse bestowed on their enemies by Marxist theorists of literature. To call someone a formalist is to accuse that person of being an elitist concerned with the technical carapace of art to the exclusion of its intellectual, human, and material significance. "Formalist" is always, even now, a term used pejoratively. I prefer, for what I do, the classical label of "commentary" or Pater's label, "aesthetic criticism." The presumption of commentary, from the first classical commentaries down to our day, is that literary works are complex enough in thought and style to solicit detailed intellectual reflection; the presumption of aesthetic criticism is that artworks have not been seen accurately until the intrinsic relations governing the structural and formal shapes they assume are perceived and accounted for. An aesthetic critic is naturally concerned with the generic and formal aspects of an artwork, its implicit poetics, its internal structures of relation, its intellectual argument, and its expressive means: but such a critic wants also to deduce and describe the internal emotional factors motivating the invention of such idiosyncratic forms. Form is content as deployed. Content is form as imagined.

In recent years, some members of the profession became unfriendly to aesthetic criticism, finding it either "naive" or "essentialist." They also became unfriendly to lyric poetry itself: lyrics were too short to be good texts for deconstructive purposes, and novels and plays appeared to be more suitable sites for the information-retrieval about social conditions on which a politicized criticism

depends. An agonized article in *PMLA* asked why the study of poetry had gone under. But in spite of such transient professional attitudes, the appetite of the young for the study of poetry hasn't abated. When scholars in English departments haven't provided it, the young have infiltrated programs in creative writing or in foreign languages to find it. The young respond to poetry for the same reason I did at their age: poems tell complex truths of human response, and they structure words with particular force, wit, charm, intellectual responsibility, and plangency. In fact, when a life-experience arrives that is as yet unrepresented in lyrics, the young person accustomed to being companioned in life by poems feels desperately at a loss, as I did when I encountered the absence of significant poems on that mysterious emotional upheaval known as motherhood. We still lack a great poet writing great poems on that subject, although Sylvia Plath made a beginning.

The larger problem for critics, professionally speaking, is that American culture is as yet too young to prize poetry—or, for that matter, any complex form of intellectuality except perhaps science (because science "works," and our New World history has made us pragmatists). America, having sloughed off Europe, is still too raw and ignorant to be proud of its own native achievements in art and poetry and music. A student can graduate from high school in the United States without knowing that there ever was an American architect or composer or painter or sculptor or philosopher, and without reading any of the more complex poems written by our American authors. That, I think, will change as we eventually become proud of the significant art-works composed on our own soil, and incorporate them, as part of the patrimony of our patriotism, into the general education of the young. Meanwhile, those of us living a life of learning in what Stevens called "the radiant and productive atmosphere" of poetry transmit as far as we can, in books and in the classroom, the beautiful, subversive, sustaining, bracing, and demanding legacy of the poets.

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